



8 February 2012

The Honourable Jason Kenney, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Citizenship and Immigration
365 Laurier Street West
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 1L1

Dear Minister,

We are writing regarding the current and future directions of the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program.

We welcome the interest you have shown in supporting this important program, through which Canadians have helped to resettle more than 200,000 refugees since 1979. Private sponsorship has not only benefitted the people for whom it has meant a safe and permanent home – it has also enriched the lives of countless Canadians, by giving them a personal connection to refugees and an opportunity to welcome newcomers into their community.

We appreciate the positive steps you are taking to improve the program's functioning, and in particular your commitment to increasing the number of privately sponsored refugees to be landed in Canada in 2012 to 5,500 and in 2013 to 6,000 individuals.

At the same time, we are deeply concerned that some of the directions in which the program is being taken may undermine its core strengths and weaken its capacity to meet the needs of refugees.

A core strength of the PSR program is the ability to name the refugees that are sponsored. In our view this is a crucial quality because it allows the program to respond to refugees who would otherwise be forgotten. Through the decades, private sponsors have reached out to refugees who are overlooked by the UNHCR, refugees whose cases don't fit current priorities, refugees who are in an out-of-the-way location and refugees who face discrimination even while fleeing persecution.

We fear that the private sponsorship door is increasingly being closed on these forgotten refugees. Private sponsors are facing more and more constraints on their ability to bring forward the cases of refugees who don't meet current government priorities. Strict limits are being imposed on applications by visa office, without taking into consideration the needs identified by the private sponsors. As a result, refugees in the area served by certain visa offices are denied the possibility of sponsorship, even though there are private sponsors ready and willing to sponsor them.

A further constraint on responses to forgotten refugees will occur if you adopt proposed changes to Group of Five sponsorships. These changes will close off access for refugees who have not been recognized by UNHCR or a State, despite the fact that refugees who can't be so recognized are among the most vulnerable.

Another core strength of the private sponsorship has traditionally been the scope it gives for leadership by civil society. The program has given Canadians the ability to set their own priorities for sponsorship, reflecting the concerns of their communities. Canadians are deeply connected in many diverse ways to the world: often their private sponsorship activity follows on from deep concerns about particular situations. We fear that by narrowing the categories of refugees that can be sponsored, we will lose the richness of the response that arises when Canadians take leadership, based on their engagement with different world situations. We are also concerned that Canadians' interest in refugee sponsorship will wane when they find that they cannot sponsor the refugees with whom they feel connected.

Because the program depends on the voluntary commitment of civil society, it is vital to manage the program in a way that recognizes and fosters Canadians' contributions. Sponsorship Agreement Holders in particular play a key role in supporting Canadians' long-term involvement in the program. We are therefore concerned about recent developments that seem to undermine SAHs' capacity to play a leadership role. While we understand the practical reasons behind capping the numbers of refugees that SAHs can apply to sponsor in 2012, we worry that too little attention has been paid to the long-term impact of asking SAHs to virtually halt their sponsorship work. We know that recruiting and guiding volunteers for sponsorship is a major task and requires significant investment of institutional resources, especially if large numbers of refugees are involved. Having been forced to be relatively inactive for a period, SAHs and their Constituent Groups may not be able to step back into refugee sponsorship when the caps are increased in the future.

Yours sincerely,

(original letter signed)

Wanda Yamamoto
President